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ABSTRACT

This document is taken from a workshop presentation focusing on the identity development of biracial children. The confusion of the academic community concerning this topic is emphasized. Three main aspects are examined: (1) "What is the identity process of any child?"; (2) "What is society?"; and (3) "How does society impact the developmental process?". The identity process is outlined as beginning at birth, when the infant first develops trust and bonds with his or her parent or caregiver. The developmental levels of infancy, young children from birth to five years of age, and adolescence are highlighted. A question and answer section is included in which the author responds to questions dealing with lack of acceptance of interracial marriages and relationships; biracial children's identity, development, and attitudes; teachers who are uncomfortable with teaching biracial children; and other children's reactions to biracial children. (BGC)

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WORKSHOP CONDUCTED BY DR. FRANCIS WARDLE[1/] RE THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF BIRACIAL CHILDREN AND SOCIETY'S IMPACT THEREON

March 4, 1989

ED 394 652

Lee Odems: I'd like to introduce Francis Wardle. He has a Ph.D. in Early Childhood Development, he's the Director of the Head Start Program in Denver, Colorado and, most importantly, he's the father of four biracial children, one of whom is here today. So without further ado, it is my pleasure to present Dr. Francis Wardle.

Dr. Wardle: Thank you. What I'd like to do this afternoon is cover the idea of biracial identity -- how we address the identity of biracial children -- and I'm coming to it from two perspectives.

But before I get into the meat of the discussion I want to cover a few points that I think affect the parameters of the discussion, to give some idea of the issues involved. I'm a writer, and I do a lot of writing in the area of biracial children, and I submitted an article that was rejected by a journal. The rejection is neither here nor there, but I wanted to share what the two reviewers said about the article, to get a sense of perspective. One reviewer -- and these are college teachers, academicians -- said, "Despite this author's desires, the substitution of one set of myths for another will not solve the identity problems of biracial children. Biracial children in America are not, never have been and never will be simply an instance of children of mixed parentage from a multicultural background that must be respected." The second reviewer said -- about the same article -- "This very fine article makes clear, novel points about how biracial children are stereotyped or overlooked and how programs should respond. This is an important article. I hope my enthusiasm for this piece is clear." My point is that academically we are very confused about the identity of biracial children. And those two people are professionals in the academic arena.

Another problem -- developmental psychologists or professionals who deal with the growth and development of children have a basic point of view from which they create their entire theories of development. The best example is Freud -- his entire

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point of view dealt with sex, and even beyond that, the penis. He thought that the entire development of people was based around that. And my point here is that when you hear people talking about development, you should try to figure out their point of view. Because every developmental psychologist has an underlying foundation on which they build their theories. And for some people, that is race, and they think that the most important aspect of development is race, and that takes care of everything else, and that takes precedence, just like Freud said that sex determines all development.

Another point that is critical -- professionals under the guise of professional objectivity are as prejudiced as the rest of us. Just because you're a professional, just because you write in journals, just because you give seminars at universities, does not mean you don't have the same biases as the rest of society. Historical conflicts, problems and hatreds should not get in the way of contemporary advancements and human progress. Germans marry English people, Jews marry Christians, Russians marry Americans, Vietnamese marry Americans. My point is that the history of these countries has not prevented them from resolving issues and going forward. On the issue of biracial identity of children -- I'm not saying I'm right, but I am saying that as a parent with four children, I have a moral responsibility to determine how I want to raise my children. I also have the political right in this country to raise them as I see fit, so long as it's legal. Other people do that -- Jehovah's Witnesses do that. If you're traditionally Jewish you raise your family a certain way. So, number one, I have the right to raise my children as I see fit and, number two, I have the moral imperative because I have four kids now, and I have to make some decisions about how I'm going to raise them. I can't wait for theories; I can't wait for discussions and books. I must decide how I'm going to raise my children now, because I have them. So those are the perspectives that I bring to this issue.

"Society sees children of one white parent and one Black parent as Black; therefore, in fairness to our children, we must raise them as Black." This is a commonly held point of view that probably all of you have heard. We hear it from parents of biracial children, we hear it from adoptive parents of biracial children, we hear it from professionals who work with biracial children, and we hear it from psychologists, sociologists, journalists -- all the experts out there who we have to deal with. Is this assumption correct? Maybe more importantly, has anyone addressed it in a thoughtful manner and examined whether or not it is correct, or do we just accept it because the experts tell us to accept it? What I want to look at this afternoon are three things -- what is the identity process of any child; what is society -- we say "society sees them as Black" -- what do we mean? -- and how does society impact the developmental process; how do they fit into each other or interface?

The identity process begins at birth when the infant develops a trust for their parents -- it's usually the parents -- the person who takes care of their basic needs. The infant bonds with the parent and he learns or she learns that his identity or her identity is critically based on that person who takes care of their basic needs. So a child learns that their identity is somehow tied in with their basic caregivers, who are usually their parents.

By about 3 to 5 years old, a child becomes very interested in everything in the real world that they perceive to be different. They're interested in color, they're interested in size, they're interested in how things are used, they're interested in bigger, smaller, longer, shorter. "I'm taller than you," or "I'm faster than you," those kinds of things. They're very interested in opposites -- big/small; fast/slow. That's a natural process; all young kids are interested in that. They're also interested in relating anything they see to themselves -- "I am bigger," "I am faster," "I am better," or "My father is better or bigger or faster." In my field we say they're egocentric; the whole world rotates around them. So they are aware of these things. They are also aware of the differences in society such as race, sex, hair color, eye color, skin color, economic status of parents, economic status of friends. They're interested in what makes people different from each other and what makes them different from other people. This is normal, this is natural, this is the way young children learn and, generally speaking, those differences don't have any positive or negative value; they are just there.

Because young children are interested in physical attributes, the real thing, and also because they're interested in how that relates to themselves, they are very interested in their parents -- that is, if their father has a beard, they identify with that; that is part of their identity and they identify with men who have beards. If their father is Black, then that becomes part of their identity, and so on with their mother. They're also interested in their parents' professions. You'll hear your kids often say, "My mother does this," or "my father does this," and they're very interested in that. So it's real clear that not only are kids interested in what is different, and in the similarity of things, but they're interested in how that relates to them and how that relates to their family. So if you have a child in an interracial family, it's obvious to them that one of their parents is Black and one is white, and that's part of their identity. It's not a positive part; it's not a negative part. So by the time a child is between 3 and 5, they know that part of their identity is biracial. They are very aware of that and it is important to who they are.

As kids get beyond 3 to 5 years old they begin to get into extended groups away from the family such as kindergarten or preschool and then school. They also get into other groups such as slumber party groups, library groups and others. Those groups can do one of three things with a child's identity: they can reinforce it, modify it or they can challenge it to the point where the child will change who they think they are. We're really not sure how this happens, but we have kids who go into school and come out as ROTC candidates; we have kids who go into school and come out as pacifists; we have kids who go into school and come out as radical socialists or hard-nosed conservatives. We're not sure how this happens, but some indications are the communication between the parents and the child, the individual behavior of the child, emotional and intellectual differences in children, and the need of the child to go on to another group or the need of the child to maybe challenge their parents' point of view.

As an early childhood educator I start out with the age between 0 and 5 and I'm pointing out here that that age is the time when children begin their sense of development. They get a sense that they are connected with their parents; they get a sense that they are different from other people in certain ways and the same in certain ways, and I will argue here that if that process up to age 5 is handled correctly by the parents, that child, whoever they are, be they Black, white or biracial, will have a strong sense of who they are.

The next big hurdle to identity is adolescence. It's a critical time to identity development; it's also a time when kids again become aware of differences. They become very aware of clothing, income of parents, racial backgrounds, language and those kinds of things. They're also interested in how they fit in; are they the same as those people over there or are they different? So the next stage in adolescence is to figure out how I fit in. But there's also a shift. When the children were younger they were very into physical descriptions -- colors, sizes, those things. As they get older they also have special interests -- athletics, political interests, social interests -- and those become important to them as well. So they will select friends not only because they look like them but because they have similar interests. They will join kids who are in gymnastics or who are in the choir or who are in the intellectual group because that has a certain status. So we've moved from the physical descriptions being the chief differences or similarities to interests being the main consideration. Kids at this age join peer groups, and the peer groups they join are those they have an affinity for.

But another thing kids of this age do -- they're not interested in doing what society wants them to do; they're interested

in challenging society. That's why we have the punk rockers, the hippies -- they all did things opposite of what society wanted them to do. Hippies didn't work, they didn't cut their hair, they didn't wash their clothes -- they did all the things that society said they shouldn't do. So it's patently wrong to say adolescents are only interested in doing what society says they should do; in fact, generally, they want to do the opposite. They want to be different; they don't want to be the same. They want to stand out. Clearly racial identity is part of being an adolescent and part of the groups you align yourself with, but it's not the only thing; there are other interests. You have cheerleaders over here, you have athletes over here, you have the intellectuals over here -- you have various groups, and they're not all defined by race and to think they are is just, I think, incorrect. Adolescence is kind of the ultimate time in this society where you make it or break it. Some adolescents get through it and become productive and successful; other adolescents use that time and start getting in a downward spiral and then it's very difficult to change and they might get into drugs and early pregnancy and into directions that then take a tremendous amount of effort to reguide. Again, we're not clear on everything that makes this happen, but some of the factors are family life, positive school experience, peer groups, sexual identity, culture, racial identity and the needs of the individual. What are the needs of the child and what group do they feel they need to belong to? I would argue that a child who successfully makes it through this period is one who has a clear sense of identity totally -- who they are, not just racially or sexually but a sense of who they are, where they're going and what they want to achieve. So I propose to you that normal development of young children starts out in infancy and achieves a certain level of function or dysfunction at the end of the adolescent period. I would like to add that we really don't know a lot about identity development, and I would like to address its sexual development. We're probably one of the most sexist societies in the world and we present that in movies, magazines, videos and on TV, and yet we have a significant amount of people in this country who grow up with a confused sexual identity. So it's not just how society sees us; it's not just a question of if we have a clearly-defined society then we're going to have a clearly-defined identity, because we don't. So that's kind of the identity track.

Now the society track -- what is society? When we say "society sees biracial kids as Black," what do we mean? What is society? Well, the definition of society, according to the dictionary, has to do with everybody. Everyone in the world is part of a society. Any collection of people is a society. The largest society is humankind. Those of us who inhabit this earth -- we are a society. A smaller society is the family. An interesting factor about society is that the smaller the society, the

more impact it has on an individual and, conversely, the more impact an individual can have on that society. If you have a small society with strong individuals, they can pretty much take it where they want to take it. Large societies have minimal impact on the individual participants, and the individual participants have minimal impact on that society, unless you happen to be the president of the country. But the average citizen in a large society has little impact on that society and, by the same token, society has little impact on them. We have thousands of different societies -- religious societies, men's fraternal societies, middle-class societies, women's consciousness-raising societies, drinking societies, linguistic societies, national membership societies, political societies, you name it. Any group of people collected for a single interest is a society that has some impact on that society.

Most of us belong to several societies. Most of us are members of a nation, members of a particular work force, members of a religious group, members of a support group like The Interracial Family Circle and so on. And most of us are comfortable juggling them and no one society takes precedence over all the others. There are a few exceptions -- born-again Christians tend to let their religious affiliation dictate which other societies they're members of; radical politicians tend to do the same. There are a few societies where that single membership becomes the dominant factor and controls what the person does, but in most cases we are members of a vast group of societies which control us to a certain degree but not totally. One of the interesting ironies is that scholars don't tend to believe that. They tend to believe that we're all in one certain society and then they can predict what we're going to do. Part of the academic profession will say, "You're Black, therefore you belong to this church and have this kind of education and therefore I can tell the way you're going to vote." Or a scholar will say, "All Hispanics are Catholic, they all have large families." Well, the fact of the matter is that's not true. And most of us cannot be pigeon-holed into one society and not another; most of us cross over societal boundaries.

Probably the society over which we have the most control and which has the most control over us is the family. The family unit is by far the strongest societal unit that most of us belong to. If you add that to the developmental context of the first five years of life, then you can persuasively argue that the family has the biggest impact on a child's development, because in the first five years that's the society in which the child is going to live. So the society that sees the child most is the family, and if that society sees the child as biracial, the chances are that that child has a very good chance of developing a very strong biracial identity. Because the society which the child sees is seeing him as biracial and is addressing him as

biracial. So when questions come up -- what am I, Black or white? -- you respond to those questions. So those first five years are the most important to identity development. And if you are comfortable about raising your child as biracial, my argument is that the child will have a strong sense of who they are by the time they reach 3 to 5 years old. After the age of 5 they begin to slip into other societies -- the extended family, their school, church groups, peer groups, dance groups -- and their societal world increases. Again the question is, how does this impact identity? We really don't know. The factors again seem to be what is the need of the child? Does the child have a need to get their identity from somewhere else or are they comfortable with their identity in the home? Does the parent pressure the child to be successful and by that pressure force the child into groups they don't really want to be in? Or force them to get attributes that they're really not comfortable with? Forcing a child who's not athletic to become athletic, for example, and to associate with athletic groups. One of the factors in the impacts of these groups depends on how many groups the child belongs to, and what kind of impact those groups have on the child. If a child only belongs to one group, say only goes to school and only has one peer group in that school, chances are that that peer group is going to have far more impact than if the child also belonged to other groups.

Another factor is how does the family continue as an identity group? Is the family still there as a strong identity group? If so, the child can always go back to the family and get support, but if the family is too busy and involved in other things, then the school group can have a tremendous impact on the child because that family society is not there any more. A child's age has an impact and other identities -- and this is critical because we tend to zero in on racial identity -- sexual identities, a sense of intellectual ability, athletic ability, other kinds of identities. If you have a child who is in a vacuum and doesn't feel they're good in any area, they're going to put all their marbles into their racial identity, because there's nothing else out there for them. But as a child grows out of the home setting, into school and the Scouts and other groups, they have an impact on him. The other kind of adolescent process is the assumption that adolescents who aren't in a lot of groups are somehow failures and somehow are not going to succeed in life. There's no evidence for that; in fact there's evidence pointing the other way -- evidence that loners, who are not the most popular kids in school, are much more successful. So our adult kinds of needs say, "If my child says he or she is biracial, then she's not going to fit into a group; therefore she's going to be unhappy." Those are adult assumptions that there's no validity to at all. So we have to question what the groups are that our kids need to be in -- is it o.k. if our children are not terribly popular at school, but outside of school they belong to a choir

and they're successful; they belong to the Scouts and they're successful; they belong to an orchestra or gymnastics and they're successful? That, in my book, is the most important thing -- that your child is in a group in which he or she can continue to develop his or her identity.

Do all societies see biracial children as Black? Well, I think that if their family does not see them as Black, then the answer is no, because they see them as biracial. And there's no question in my mind that if you have a functional family, a family that takes pride in the parents' relationship and who their children are, then their children will gain a strong sense of biracial identity. You go beyond that to the extended family. If the extended family has come to terms with the interracial marriage, then they can provide support for the child too. A child clearly knows that he has a Black grandfather and a white grandfather, and a Black grandmother and a white grandmother, and that's part of their identity and they understand that that's who they are. And then you go to child care and the schools and you say, "My child is biracial and this is what I want you to do to support her sense of identity." The other thing is that as the child gets into school and into high school, most of the groups he chooses are because of his special interests or special concerns or talents. Not because of race. And not only does the child select the group based on what the group provides, but the group selects the kid based on what talents the kid has to fit into the group. If a gymnastics group is looking for a good gymnast, they don't go out looking for a good white gymnast or a good Black gymnast; they just want a good gymnast. So there are groups that select you for your ability and not for your racial identity. As the child's identity group gets bigger -- they go from family to school to camp or whatever and then they're members of their state and their country -- the point of view, the way society sees them, gets more and more narrow. There's no question that most Americans see biracial children as Black. That is the way the larger society sees them. However, as I argued before, the bigger society gets, the less impact it has on an individual. So when a child who grows up as a Jehovah's Witness views something on TV about celebrating Christmas, he knows that his identity group, his family, doesn't allow that, and that his identity and his family is not part of that particular idea of being American. He knows that and he's comfortable with that, and he can clearly differentiate the two.

I would argue that if you raise biracial children being comfortable with who they are, they can begin to make those separations and say, "That part of American identity doesn't fit this part of my life."

We are in a society that is very capitalistic, very materialistic, very militaristic and very individualistic. Yet we have

people who are pacifists, we have people who live in collectives and share everything, we have people who own nothing, we have people who completely take the other point of view. And they live comfortably and successfully in this society. And nobody says that "society doesn't see you as pacifists, so you can't be pacifists." We say that in a free society, you have the right to do that. A child can be raised a Jehovah's Witness or Jewish or a pacifist or whatever it is and feel comfortable about it.

The other thing that is really more philosophical than anything, but I think is very critical, is that the only way society progresses is when people reject the way that society sees them. The women's movement was based on women who said, "We are no longer willing to take the way society sees us; we don't agree with that." The Black movement progressed because people said, "We're no longer willing to accept the way society sees us. We want it to change." So the only progress society makes is by people who say, "The way society sees us is not correct and we're going to change it." Women didn't used to vote; children used to work in factories and people said, "That's not acceptable; that view of society is not acceptable," and they changed it. So the notion of rejecting the way society sees you or challenging that is a very popular American notion. It's not a new notion. And for us who are raising biracial kids to feel that we're coming out of left field here, that's just not true, because it's a very popular notion.

I sincerely believe that interracial families can raise their children with a secure sense of a biracial identity. I also believe that we have a right to do that in this society if we choose to. But I think we need to do things to make that happen; we can't just say, "it's going to happen." We need to provide an environment in the home that's open -- open to discussions. When your 3-year old child comes home and says, "What am I, mommy, Black or white?", you start talking about it and start asking questions -- "What do you think you are?" And he might say, as in my case, "Daddy's white and you're Black, so what am I?" And then you provide the discussion. Secondly, we begin to instill very early on a sense of pride in being biracial. "You're beautiful; your hair is beautiful, your skin color is beautiful, there's a kid on TV like you, look how pretty she is." You begin to give them a real sense that their identity is a beautiful identity and it has a legitimacy and purpose and belongs, along with all the other rainbow colors out there. You need to begin to impact on other kids. If your child goes to day care and there's some interaction in the classroom that is negative to her identity, you get in there. You talk to the teacher and the staff and say, "That's not acceptable to me. This is the way we're raising our child and this is the way we expect you to support that identity in the child care center."

As I look at this issue and study it and write about it and talk about it, it seems to me that the most important issue about raising children biracially is how comfortable and proud the parents feel about crossing racial lines. If you're not comfortable about that decision, then there are going to be problems raising your children. It's tremendously important for interracial couples to get that all out and deal with it and feel comfortable that they have a right to marry across racial lines; that they feel good about it and feel that it's a strong statement as to the way they feel about something. But if you don't feel good about that choice, then when it comes to raising your children there are going to be problems. If you feel guilty about it or if you feel that somehow you've rejected part of your background by choosing somebody else, that is going to reflect on how you raise your children.

Another point I want to bring out is about experts. If Dr. Spock says, "It is wrong for you to allow your children to sleep with you," I'd say, "Dr. Spock, you're full of it; as far as I'm concerned there's nothing wrong with allowing your children to sleep with you." I as a parent make that decision. What I'm saying is that I, as a parent, am the expert when it comes to raising biracial children, and you are the experts. It is your responsibility to be the expert, because they're your children. And I'm not sure why we as interracial parents seem to be more open to expert advice than other parents. Most other parents pick and choose. If one expert says something they don't agree with, they go find another expert. But we somehow think that the experts know how to raise biracial children, and they don't. You know, I didn't come to this position just by going to school. I came to it real slowly and after a lot of discussions with my wife, who is probably even more vocal than I am about the fact that these kids are biracial. Because we have a right and a moral responsibility to raise our children as we believe we should. Yes, we can listen to experts, because we want to know good child-rearing techniques, but experts are so often wrong. There was a whole period in American history when the experts were saying it was wrong to breast-feed your baby. Every expert told you that. It just wasn't acceptable to do that. They felt there was a great deal of danger if you breast-fed your baby. Now we know that the experts were wrong. And it's the same with allowing your children to sleep with you; experts are now beginning to realize that there's nothing wrong with it. So my point is that when people say that "Society sees our children as Black and therefore we must raise them as Black," look at what they mean by society. Look at how that impacts the child. Look at the kind of groups your children do elect to be part of. Is it based on race? Is it based on ability or interests? A lot is based on sex -- girls will join groups that have other girls in them and that tends to be more important than race. So my ultimate point is, examine what is being said. Now I obviously have

come to a point of view where I feel that identifying biracial children as Black is not correct, but I'm not selling that to you. What I am trying to sell to you is the idea that you should look at that point of view that says your children are Black, and look at where it comes from. Is it accurate? And finally, if you have kids of your own, make a decision based on what you believe and not what some expert believes because, as I showed you when reading the introductory statements, two experts in Early Childhood Development had diametrically opposing points of view when it came down to how to raise biracial children.

Question & Answer Session:

(Dr. Wardle is designated as "W"; questioners are designated with numbers.)

1. One of the things that concerns me, as far as the development of my child, is that part of my family doesn't accept my interracial marriage, and I'm wondering whether we should bring that up at some point in time or should we wait for our child to address that?

W. Well, I think that first of all you should try to have interaction with family members who are supportive and really try to point that out. Beyond that you would address it like any other disagreement with a family member, and that's another point to bring out -- we have all these problems with our relatives and schools, but when it's a racial one we blow the whole thing up. Most parents, for example, are not happy with who their kids marry, regardless of race, because their expectations are so high. So wait until it becomes an issue and then just say, "He or she doesn't like the person I married."

1. The situation is that it's my brother who doesn't accept my relationship, and he lives in the same area as we do.

W. The thing to be careful of in all these things -- and I've done it, I'll be very honest about it -- don't get into a discussion of race if the kid is not interested in race. The kid may just be interested in why you don't get along with your brother, and all you may have to say is, "My brother doesn't like the man I married," and that may be all the kid wants. I have a wonderful example -- I was watching TV with one of my children, we were watching a soccer game, and Morocco was playing England and my child asked, "Who are the black people?" so I said, "Well, they're from Africa," and he said, "No, that one," and he pointed to the referee, who was dressed in black. It had nothing to do with race. So you've got to be real careful about that, because often it doesn't have anything to do with race.

2. My family and my husband's family are both very accepting of us, and I heard other people in the group saying that their children ask, "Why is mommy white and daddy Black?" but my kid has never asked that question and he's 8. Is he supposed to be asking me this?

W. Kids shift from one thing to another depending on what's important to them and sometimes that's not important. And again, if we make it important and make it an issue when it isn't, we're in trouble. What's important is to allow kids to address those issues and allow them to see race as one of the attributes people have, along with size and height and ability and everything else. It'll come up eventually, I think, but you don't want to push it on him when he's not ready.

2. When we were interviewed by a newspaper, the reporter wanted to take a picture of my family, and my son didn't want to be in the picture, and I got to thinking that maybe he didn't want people to know that he was in an interracial family, so I asked him why he didn't want to be in the picture and he said, "Because they won't let me have my 2 dogs in the picture."

W. The other thing is -- and again experts get into trouble over this -- that kids have as many individual differences as adults do, and to say all kids will react one way is not true. And he may have a real sophisticated answer for you, like my oldest child, who's 11. She never talks about [being biracial]. But when an issue comes up at school, she has these very sophisticated answers which show she's thought about it. She's just not a very open person.

3. In schools sometimes you run into situations with teachers who are very uncomfortable with the biracial situation of the child. In my situation there are 2 biracial boys, mine and another child, in the same classroom, and up through the second marking period the teacher would get their names confused. And finally I had to call the principal and say, "Look, she can't keep doing this." However, my son is really suffering with a lot of self-esteem problems in her class, and I feel that this is an underlying issue for her, but I don't feel that I can go in there and say, "I think you have a problem with this." Well, I guess I could, but I feel like it would be such an attack on her.

W. Yes, but this is your child and he's going through a very important period of development and this is a matter of philosophy. I have 4 kids in school and if there's a problem I'll pick up the phone and call the principal. This is my kid, my taxes go to pay the teacher, and if it's not right I want him out. The bottom line, to me, is that the child is never going to go through that period again. It's gone. You can't go back. You can't say, "Well, we'll deal with it later," because it's

gone for your child, and if it's an issue, I would address it. I would talk to the Curriculum Specialist and ask if they have any multicultural materials, and I would talk to the Training Specialist and say, "I think you need training on how to deal with the identity issues of biracial kids because there's plenty more out there."

3. The problem with his teacher -- she will announce things to the whole class, like the grades the kids make, and sometimes she will say something punitive to my son and not the other kids, and because of the fact that she mixed these 2 kids up, when the only thing they had in common was sandy-colored hair -- other than that, they're completely different in personality and everything...

4. So you're objecting not just to what you perceive as a racial issue, but the teacher's whole attitude in the classroom?

3. Well, there are problems aside from the race issue, yes, but I guess I get the sense that some teachers really don't accept the biracial identity of this child, and they have a difficult time because they try to pigeon-hole these kids and they can't quite do that in this case because the kid doesn't fall into their social stereotypes.

W. There's no question that in education people don't know how to deal with mixed kids. And I've had one of two responses -- either they say, "Well, they're just kids, they don't have needs other than what all kids have," or they'll say, "We don't know; come help us." So they may want you to come in and discuss the needs of a biracial child. I had an interesting experience -- I'm the director of a Head Start program for 4-year olds, and this one teacher had an assignment in college where she had to take the anti position on interracial marriage, and she asked if I had any material, which of course I did, and so we talked and I gave her the material, and she came back later and said, "Just the process of discussing it has made me much more accepting of biracial kids." She said, "I used to think they were different and I used to think they had a real problem, but just talking with you changed my point of view." So it's an unknown to some people. There are a lot of mixed kids out there and a lot of people just don't know how to handle them.

5. What constitutes a biracial identity? I ask that based on the fact that even single-race identities vary so widely, since Southern Blacks are different from Northern Blacks and Northern whites are different from Midwestern whites. So how can you have a, quote, biracial identity?

W. In the pure sense of the word you can't. What we're looking at is an accurate genetic, cultural, historic heritage

for a child. So if the child has a family line that includes Native American, Poles, Southern Blacks and Creole, that is their identity. And that becomes part of their cultural identity and their historical heritage. The ultimate identity of who you are is all those factors that come together. Technically speaking, you're correct. A biracial identity is a very simplistic way of looking at it, and the only reason I argue for using that term is because it's easier to understand. But the ultimate identity -- take my children, for instance. They see themselves as partly English, partly American Black, partly Oriental and partly Chickasaw Indian. That is their identity. It's not "biracial"; it's all those. So the only reason I use that term is to make it clear that the children have an identity from both sides of their family. I did an article recently where I said that a biracial identity is not just two identities; it's everything. You are a product of your heritage -- the cultural, historic and genetic parts.

5. So more or less it comes from the identity of your parents.

W. And those parts of your parents' backgrounds that they're proud of. They're not going to tell you much about things they don't want to tell you, like grandpa was in jail or things like that.

6. Sometimes what you tell your child is not the way the child feels about it. My son is 18 now, and when he as very young, there weren't a lot of interracial families in evidence, and I felt that he needed to fit in and I felt that I should refer to him as Black, and I did for years, until I joined the IFC and began listening to what other people, like Eileen Harris, were saying about how they identified their children as biracial. Eventually I came around to the point of view that biracial was a more accurate term to use. Well, we had a Topic Question in the IFC Newsletter which asked, "How do you identify your children racially and how do your children identify themselves?" So I answered that I now identified my children as biracial. And I asked my son how he identified himself <u>now</u>, and he said, "The same as always -- multiracial." I said, "What do you mean, 'the same as always'? I thought you used to identify yourself as Black," and he said, "No, <u>you</u> identified me as Black, I never thought of myself as Black." And I said, "Really? Why not?" And he said, "Because I would look at you and know I wasn't Black." And that really surprised me. But children don't look at the question of racial identity from a political point of view; they just see it as it is.

W. Yes, and I think that's an argument against raising your children as Black, because children are no dummies. As your son said, "How can I be Black when my mother's white? They might

think, "Somebody's lying to me," or they might think that it must be a real insult to be white, because they're not including it. But I do a lot with young kids, because that's my job, and one of the things that comes up is the fact that some kids are handicapped. You've got to be real accurate with kids and if they ask why someone doesn't have a leg, you've got to discuss it with them. Because if you don't discuss it they think, "There must be something strange about this kid because he doesn't have a leg, because nobody wants to talk about it." So give kids the information. Don't be scared of it. Say, "You're biracial because one parent is white and one is Black."

5. I know a white woman in an interracial marriage with a young child and I asked her what she identifies her child as and she said "white." And I was really stunned. But she said she was surprised because she had never thought about it, and her initial reaction was that her daughter was white.

W. That's a good point. There are a lot of interracial families who are raising their kids as white, and I think that's equally as inaccurate as saying their kids are Black.

5. I was really surprised that she hadn't even considered it.

W. A lot of parents don't. There's a whole group of parents who say, "My kid is a kid just like all other kids and we're not going to deal with the racial issue." And again, I think that's inaccurate because kids are very interested in the way people are the same or different and they see that and want to know about it. They observe the way the world fits together and if it doesn't, they want to know why. If a kid lives in an all-white neighborhood, and one of his parents is Black, he'll probably ask what's going on, because he knows his family is different. So talk to him about it. Of course the thing you get now is, "All my friends have only one parent, why are you guys still together?"

4. Some people see an obviously biracial child and yet they refer to him as "Black." I don't know if I should correct them, or

W. Whose child is it?

4. Mine.

W. If it was mine, I'd correct them. But it's a lot of things. If you look at literature it says "If you have curly hair, you're Black." But I have curly hair and I'm not Black. Or "if you have skin anything beyond white-washed, you're Black." So people have learned to look at the world in those

stereotypical terms. A lot of people are raised with that idea, and if a kid has brown eyes and skin a little darker than white, and curly hair, it goes into their computer and comes out: that kid is Black. And it's based on fact -- the law used to say that if you had any Black heritage, you were Black. So people have been taught that. But I want my kids to know that I'm proud they're biracial. I sincerely want that. Now there are times when it's not an issue and you don't deal with it. But when it comes up, I'm going to show them that I'm proud they're biracial, and I'm going to show the rest of the world that I'm proud of it. And the other thing that's more of a skill is that you've got to teach your biracial kids how to defend themselves, how to stand up for themselves. One way to teach is by example. That is, when someone uses the wrong term with you and you correct them in a certain way, possibly the next time another kid says to your kid, "You're Black," your child will say exactly what you said. Because kids do learn by example. But you don't want to make it an issue when it's not.

4. Well, sometimes kids say "You're Black" in such a way that you know they're not just identifying the child; they're saying it in a mean way.

6. Are you saying that when another child calls your kid "Black," they're using the word in a racially derogatory way?

4. Yes.

6. Well that's something entirely different. Then you tell him to punch the kid.

4. I'm wondering if there's another way for him to defend himself.

W. Yes, you do it verbally. You teach the child how to respond and say, "I hate to tell you this, but I'm not Black because my mother's white." You give him verbal responses.

5. What about when a biracial child, because of his environment, wants to identify himself as something else? For example, if the family lives in an all-Black neighborhood, and all the other kids are Black, the child may want to feel that he's no different from the other kids.

W. Well, I think that that is the ultimate question when raising kids -- what happens when your kid wants to do something that you're not tremendously comfortable with? And then that gets into what are the rights of the children? I would say your child has a right to do that. However, I do think you ought to discuss openly with your child that there are a lot of Black people who do not see your child as Black, and that might come up

and your child needs to know that. But if he still is comfortable with identifying himself as Black, then that's o.k.

3. I'm concerned with the question of dating. I have a 12-year old son and, as you said, their social identity is very important at that age. I'm concerned with him facing the situation where a white girl will refuse to date him because of the racial difference. Other than being supportive as a parent, what can I do?

W. First of all, as I said before, don't assume that all his problems will be because of race. Other young men have the problem of being rejected when they ask for a date, whether it has to do with race or not. It's part of being an adolescent to be rejected when you ask for a date, and everyone goes through this, so to assume that it's only biracial kids who have that problem is crazy. That's part of the process of development. And you have to use the process of elimination to find those people who do want to go out with you. But to me that's the first big issue. When our child has a problem we always think first that it's because he's biracial. But that would mean that no Black kids or white kids ever have problems -- only biracial kids have problems.

4. My son is a little young to date yet, but he's already been told by his playmates that he can't date white girls, and that really bothers me.

6. But there are situations that come up that are racially motivated, and I think you have to give your kids that information. We live in P.G. County, where the police are notorious for harassing young Black males, so I told my son, who is brown-skinned, that while it may never happen to him, if he is ever stopped by a cop, he should be very polite, and keep his hands in view so he doesn't accidentally get shot, and if they take him to the station he should ask if he could call his mother at her law firm. And he doesn't need to say that I'm a secretary there either. But I want him to make clear to the police that he does know something about his rights, and he's in a position to contact some people who have some clout. And I told him that, again, while it may never happen, the situation could come up where he's rejected by a white girl or by her parents because he's not white. I think it's a good idea to discuss with your kids some of the situations they might come across because they're not white.

[End]